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Consideration and adoption of the report of the Committee to the General Assembly at its sixty-fourth session

Draft report

Chapter III

General debate

Rapporteur: Sheree **Chambers** (Jamaica)

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee on Information: Algeria, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, China, the Congo, Croatia, Cuba, the Czech Republic (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the European Union), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the Rio Group), Pakistan, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Romania, the Russian Federation, Senegal, Sri Lanka, the Sudan (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the Group of 77 and China), Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States of America, Yemen and Zambia. Palestine, in its capacity as observer, also made a statement. The general debate was preceded by statements made by the Chairman of the Committee and the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information of the Department of Public Information of the United Nations Secretariat.

2. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, speakers emphasized the central role of the United Nations in global affairs and of the Department of Public Information as its public voice. One speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, said that his group believed that continued improvement of the partnership between the Department of Public Information and the Committee on Information was essential in promoting the work of the United Nations and issues of importance to the international community. It was critical, he noted, for the Department to continuously project United Nations ideals and

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accomplishments, intensify outreach and transmit the Organization's message to all peoples around the world.

3. Another speaker, also addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, said that the role of the Department of Public Information was to reach the international public with information on the challenges and corresponding measures agreed upon by all Member States. Speaking on behalf of another large group, one speaker praised the new format of the reports of the Department, along with its dissemination of information on a wide variety of priority United Nations issues. In promoting the ad hoc thematic debates held by the General Assembly, the group called for the maintaining of objectivity in conveying its messages and for the undertaking of future media campaigns on the energy and ecological crises and their impact on poverty. Another speaker noted that public information at the United Nations should be dedicated to transparency, which in turn should be assured by increasingly precise, impartial and coherent strategic communications. In order for the Department of Public Information to perform that noble task, the speaker noted, it needed adequate funds and a clear mandate, which she hoped would be forthcoming through consensus.

4. One speaker, representing a large group, expressed satisfaction with the work of the Department of Public Information in promoting better understanding of various thematic issues, and commended such new initiatives as UN4U, the first United Nations Book Day, the txt4peace website, United Nations Member States Wiki and the new website nuyearbook.un.org. Another speaker, also representing a large group, called for further enhancing the effectiveness of the Department's work within a limited budget through the introduction of benchmarks and clear criteria. Another speaker argued that the Department should always commit itself to reaching out to the widest possible audiences and to providing accurate, relevant, impartial, balanced and timely information on the Organization's work. Its efforts in addressing such important issues as United Nations reform, the Millennium Development Goals, sustainable development, the dialogue among civilizations and the culture of peace were commendable, he noted. It was also important for the Department of Public Information to help the international community better understand emerging issues such as the influenza A (H1N1) virus outbreak and the food crisis, he said. Another speaker encouraged the Department of Public Information to identify ways to improve the coordination, efficiency and integration of its activities throughout the United Nations system, so as to achieve "the greatest public impact with the greatest efficiency".

5. Another speaker, citing the global financial crisis, called for greater emphasis on development. He noted that the downturn had hit developing countries hardest, creating difficulties for them in their efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The United Nations was duty-bound to protect their interests, and the Department of Public Information should enlighten the international media and public opinion alike by highlighting their difficulties. It should also call on the global community to fulfil aid commitments, he said. Another speaker, while commending the Department for its focus on development, human rights and peace and security as its principal information and communications priorities, asked the Department to pay more attention to covering the Organization's role in addressing the world financial crisis.

6. Several speakers called for more vigorous intervention from the United Nations in bridging the "digital divide". One speaker observed that the people in the global South needed greater access to information technology and that the Department of Public Information should ensure that the Digital Solidarity Fund was better known. Another speaker said it was of crucial importance to change a situation in which the developing world lacked access to new information technology and therefore a large portion of the information flow, as well as control over the content of the information disseminated. The United Nations had a key role to play in enabling the rational use and more social appropriation of information technology, he said. Another speaker noted that there was a need for continued openness to the use of new information technology, including further improvements in use of the Internet. In that light, the speaker commended the creation of the Member State portal DeleGate.

7. Striking a cautionary note, another speaker said that despite substantial progress in the field of information and communications technology, which had contributed to a rapprochement between peoples and cultures, there would be a continued need for the written press in respect of promoting United Nations products and goals. Another speaker, while applauding the creative use of modern technology, stressed that the use of more traditional technologies, and the bridging of the digital divide, were critical to audiences in developing countries. While the Internet would be a primary driver of communications in the coming years, the most relevant media for people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean were traditional, including print and radio, another speaker said. In this regard, she welcomed the efforts of the Department of Public Information to disseminate programmes directly to broadcasting stations.

8. Several speakers discussed the importance of achieving linguistic parity in the work of the Department of Public Information. One speaker, advocating further strengthening of multilingualism, noted that the Department should work to close the gap between the number of web pages offered in English and those in other languages. Another speaker, reflecting the view of a large group of Member States, noted that more resources should be allocated for achieving full parity of languages and bridging the gap among websites in the Organization's six official languages. One speaker noted that he was concerned about various language disparities. For example, the Arabic language page needed improvement. Another speaker, noting progress in enhancing the Department's Russian web service, called for a balanced allocation of resources among all official languages for website maintenance.

9. A number of speakers referred to the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue and asked the Department of Public Information to play a more vigorous role in promoting the dialogue among civilizations. One speaker noted that efforts to disseminate information in support of inter-civilizational dialogue and to condemn attacks on religion were designed to promote "respect for the other", and also noted that the United Nations had a pioneering role to play in that regard. Another speaker said that his Government looked forward to more progress in enhancing the Organization's image and promoting both dialogue and understanding among civilizations.

10. Several speakers lauded the continued cooperation of the Department of Public Information with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support. One speaker encouraged the Department of Public Information to

continue working with those two Departments, as it was important for Member States and the public to receive up-to-date information on United Nations peacekeeping. He also supported the implementation of the zero-tolerance policy on acts of sexual exploitation and abuse, and was pleased to learn of the work of the Department of Public Information with the Conduct and Discipline Unit on a web-based database of cases involving such acts.

11. Several speakers commented on the special information programme on the question of Palestine of the Department of Public Information. One speaker noted, on behalf of a large group, that the Programme was useful in offering an annual training programme for Palestinian media professionals designed to assist them in developing their media capacity and skills. These and other activities undertaken by the Department in this regard should be strengthened, he said. Another speaker noted that his country appreciated the Department's work on the question of Palestine, and considered sensitization of public opinion important for fostering a grass-roots peace initiative in the Middle East. Another speaker, underlining the importance of the special information programme on the question of Palestine, lauded the Department's annual international media seminar on the question of Palestine and reaffirmed the importance of digitizing materials on the history of the Palestine question. Another speaker, however, said he was concerned about the information programme on Palestine, which was the only thematic issue covered by the Department that was focused on a specific conflict and that offered a one-sided and misleading narrative of events in the region of the Middle East.

12. Several speakers commented on the outreach programmes of the Department of Public Information and lauded its work with students and youth. One speaker expressed support for the further strengthening of cooperation with civil society organizations and increasing the visibility of information in the area of violence against women. One speaker called attention to the possibility of exploring further partnerships between the United Nations and the private sector to enhance the visibility of the Organization's activities. A number of speakers applauded the Department for its outreach programme on the Holocaust. Speakers also lauded the Department for its efforts to mark the first International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Stressing the importance of commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, one speaker called for adequate funding for annual commemorations of the event, as well as for all other activities under the Department's mandate.

13. One speaker commended the work of the Department of Public Information in commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Identifying climate change as a priority area, one speaker said his Government was interested in learning how other small developing countries were confronting that challenge. He asked the Department to make greater efforts to highlight the effects of global warming by producing user-friendly publicity materials which could be broadcast over national media. The same speaker asked the Department to support the promotion of International Mother Language Day. While expressing pleasure at the efforts of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to publicize the Day, he regretted that the Department had done little in that regard.

14. Several speakers commented on the proposal of the Department of Public Information to replace *UN Chronicle* with *UN Affairs* magazine. One speaker, on

behalf of a large group, said that his group was of the view that the Department should continue the publication of *UN Chronicle* and consider ways of improving it, while taking into account "educational outreach, core audiences and parity of languages". Another speaker, also representing a large group, supported the transformation of *UN Chronicle* into *UN Affairs* in order to reach out more effectively to scholars and policy shapers and end the stagnation and decline in respect of subscriptions. In that light, he noted that the effort to issue *UN Affairs* in more languages through partnerships with universities, and to create a platform for wider perspectives on pressing challenges in the United Nations agenda, was commendable.

15. Another speaker commended the Department of Public Information for providing information on the draft of a new publication that would replace *UN Chronicle*. At the same time, he noted, any shortcomings were due to the fact that it had not adapted to readers' tastes, and added that the focus should be placed on efforts to modernize it. There was no incongruity, he underlined, between continuing to publish *UN Chronicle* and providing in-depth analysis of the issues in the agenda of the Organization.

16. The work and activities of the network of United Nations information centres were commented on by several speakers. A speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, urged that all possible measures be taken to strengthen the United Nations information centres. "These centres," he said, "are a vital source for the flow of information as they help bridge the gap between the developed and developing countries in terms of access of information and communications technologies." Any decision to reorganize the United Nations information centres must be made in close consultation with the host countries, and he stressed that "it must take into account the geographical, linguistic and technological characters and needs of different regions".

17. Another speaker, also representing a large group, noted that regional and local information centres "continue to be an important tool in the service of DPI's mission". The centres, he noted, provided the most direct means of communication with the world public and needed to be a step ahead on topical issues. Referring to a recent report on United Nations information centres by the Office of Internal Oversight Services, the speaker noted that an important tool for raising the efficiency of the centres in the context of their resource and capacity constraints would be the attainment of comparable evaluation of performance of individual centres, both regional and local, which would invite further "competitive" sharing of lessons learned and best practices among them. Another speaker argued that the Department of Public Information needed to continuously review the allocation of staff and financial resources to centres in developing countries, while providing necessary budgetary resources.

18. A number of speakers referred to the proposal for a centre in Luanda for Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa. One speaker regretted that, despite the offer by the Government of Angola to host, and provide rent- and maintenance-free premises for, an information centre in Luanda, no progress had been made towards creating such a centre. Another speaker noted that while her Government commended the United Nations Regional Information Centre in Brussels for supplying information to Portuguese-speaking countries, the urgent and specific needs of Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa were not being met. She called

upon the Department of Public Information to make the centre in Angola "feasible and a reality".

19. Several speakers commended the work being carried out by United Nations information centres in their countries. Others referred to specific issues requiring attention. For example, one speaker noted that it was regrettable that the Department had not appointed a director for the United Nations information centre in Sanaa, which was of special importance and was located in one of the world's least developed countries. Another speaker pointed out that the United Nations information centre in Dhaka had been without a full-time director for almost 25 years, while commending the national staff at the centre for making the best use of its meagre resources in promoting the Millennium Development Goals and the country's role in United Nations peacekeeping.

20. In connection with the observance of World Press Freedom Day, several speakers referred to the importance of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. On behalf of a large group, one speaker observed that, given that journalists in pursuit of important tasks continued to be killed, his group underlined the importance of World Press Freedom Day in raising the awareness of Governments regarding the duty to respect and uphold the right to freedom of expression. Calling attention to World Press Freedom Day, another speaker pointed out that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed the right of everyone to full freedom of expression, including "freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". Also in connection with the observance of World Press Freedom Day, another speaker paid tribute to the "family of professionals" who continued to make known the work of the United Nations.